

Guide to work-based learning experiences.

Helping people with disabilities get real-life experience to support work is a key approach to ensuring informed choice and employment success.

What is a work-based learning experience?

No one wants to make choices without knowing the options — and when it comes to work, it's hard to know your options if you've never had related experience. That's why it's so important to provide experiences that are purposeful and outcome-oriented.

Work-based learning experiences are training and educational opportunities that help a person build the knowledge and skills to support their future career. The ultimate goal of these experiences is to prepare and support each person to obtain and be successful in competitive integrated employment.

The experiences we'll address here are designed to help people discover their interests, their strengths and skills, their likes and dislikes, and their training or support needs.

Experiences that support work are:

- **Learning focused.** The job seeker is learning about different community jobs and work skills while the support professional is learning about the job seeker's strengths, interests and ideal working conditions.
- **Person centered.** The job seeker's known motivators, interests and emerging skills influence the experiences they might try.
- **Time limited.** Work-based learning experiences are short-term.
- **Authentic.** Work-based learning experiences involve doing real activities with people who typically do them.
- **Individualized.** Some work-based learning experiences are created for the specific person, while others are a combination of individualized experience and small group experience.
- **Paid or unpaid.** A work-based learning experience may sometimes include paid work, such as a summer youth experience or a paid internship, but more often these experiences are unpaid.

Many different types of experiences can support work. Some work-based learning experiences are directly with employers, while others are focused on peers or community members. As you read through the types of experiences that support work, think about how you could use each one in helping the people you support move toward their employment goals.

What are common types of work-based learning experiences?

Work-based learning experiences may include:

Mentoring

Various forms of mentor relationships can help people learn about the world of work and explore their career paths. For example, **career mentoring** is an opportunity for a person to engage with a mentor who teaches or provides career-related guidance and advice.

With **peer mentoring**, the job seeker learns from people with disabilities who are employed in competitive community jobs. Peers of a similar age can act as a sounding board for ideas and plans and provide informal guidance.

Another option is **disability mentoring**, in which a person with a disability mentors someone with a similar disability. The mentor serves as a role model, with the relationship typically focusing on a specific area — such as living independently, recovering from a traumatic event, or getting or starting a job.

Informational interviews

An informational interview is an informal conversation between a job seeker and someone working in a career area or job of interest. Informational interviews usually take about 15 to 30 minutes and may involve a tour of the business. These interviews help the job seeker learn about different jobs in a specific business or industry. The objective isn't to find a job opening or interview for a specific position, but instead to learn from the person being interviewed — so the job seeker should be prepared to ask questions. In some cases, an informational interview may lead to an opportunity to establish a subsequent work experience.

Internships

An internship is a time-limited opportunity available to job seekers to enhance skill development and future opportunities for competitive integrated employment. Internships are ideal for job seekers who are ready to begin work but have a gap in work history or need relevant work experience related to their education or training. Internships can be paid or unpaid. If unpaid, the person can't replace another employee or fill an open position. Some internships result in a job offer — although there's no obligation for the employer to offer a paid position at the end of the internship, or for the intern to accept a paid position, if offered.

Job shadowing

Job shadowing is a brief work-site experience where a job seeker observes an employee in his or her daily activities. Job shadowing is an opportunity for a job seeker to observe different jobs and ask questions about the skills, knowledge and abilities needed to perform the job — plus see an example of job-specific tasks and work behavior. Most job shadowing experiences last 1 to 2 hours.

Volunteering

Volunteering may be a one-time or ongoing commitment. Volunteering isn't a substitute for paid work, but it can help prepare a person for community employment. Most volunteer opportunities are for nonprofit organizations, either directly or indirectly supporting a specific cause or people outside the family or household. Ideally, a volunteer position offers contact or interaction with others with and without disabilities.

Workplace tours

A workplace tour is an opportunity for a person to see a specific work site first-hand. During the tour, the person can learn about the business, meet employees, ask questions and observe work in progress. Unlike job shadowing and informational interviews, workplace tours are often conducted as a group.

On-the-job evaluation

Primarily used prior to the determination of a specific job goal to help figure out potential job goals and supports needed. An OJE is a short-term work experience that provides the opportunity for the individual and VRS counselor to evaluate the suitability of a particular career or occupational area of interest.

Short-term work experiences

Short-term work experiences allow a person to try job-specific tasks. These experiences can help the job seeker further identify interests and skills, as well as gauge working conditions. Most short-term work experiences are unpaid.

Pre-employment transition services work experiences

A pre-employment transition services work experience allows a job seeker to understand the nature of a specific job and to build soft skills. Examples include an intermediate job where an employer pays the job seeker's wages or a short-term experience where the provider pays the person's wages.

What are the keys to creating effective work-based learning experiences?

Take a step-by-step approach to create effective work-based learning experiences.

Step 1: Initiate a person-centered planning process

Person-centered planning focuses on setting goals for competitive integrated employment that reflect the job seeker's interests, preferences, skills, talents and conditions for success. The process is led by the job seeker and helps to determine their starting place on the path to employment.

Charting the LifeCourse offers key planning tools to support person-centered planning:

- [Employment guide](#) (PDF): Helps the job seeker begin to think about jobs, careers or continuing education
- [Personal profile](#) (PDF): Helps the job seeker create a personal introduction that captures key information about who they are and what matters to them
- [Life trajectory](#) (PDF): Helps the job seeker identify what they want and don't want for their life, and the steps they can take to get there
- [Integrated supports star](#) (PDF): Helps the job seeker identify what they have — and what they need — to be successful in work, including the type of natural supports that anyone might use.

Step 2: Consider which types of experiences would be most helpful

Work-based learning experiences provide an opportunity to explore interests, skills, working conditions and possible supports, with an ultimate goal of finding employment that reflects the person's strengths. Work with the job seeker and the employment team to identify the types of experiences that would best support progress toward the employment goal.

Step 3: Decide where the experience should take place

To set the stage for targeted skill development, establish work-based learning experiences around the job seeker's known strengths, interests and learning goals. Survey the employment team, the job seeker and the family for connections to familiar community businesses. Established networks in the business community may be more invested in the job seeker and open to hosting a work experience.

Work with the job seeker and the rest of the employment team to decide if the experience should take place with one business or a series of businesses. A job seeker who's just beginning to explore work and is unsure of what they like could benefit from exploring a variety of businesses. A job seeker who's aware of their own interests and talents might benefit from a more intensive experience with a single business that allows them to learn job- or industry-specific details.

Step 4: Identify who's involved in decision making about the experience

The job seeker should be the primary decision maker throughout the process, with the employment team composed of people invited by the job seeker. This might include family members, friends, favorite community members, teachers, program staff and specialized employment personnel. If the job seeker is younger than 18 or under guardianship, the parent or guardian must give permission for the job seeker to participate — but the job seeker should remain the primary decision maker.

Step 5: Set the length of the experience

Link the length of the work-based learning experience to the job seeker's goals. Job seekers who have little experience or limited opportunity to gain work skills or explore interests may benefit from a series of informational interviews or several short term, 1- to 2-hour job shadows. Once the job seeker begins to find preferences and emerging skill sets, a more in-depth experience to try out and learn job specific skills may be the best fit.

Step 6: Establish the timing of the experience

The timing of work-based learning experiences depends on many factors, such as availability of the job seeker, business and staff. Some work experiences are possible only during specific seasons, while others are available year-round. For youth, work experiences can often be arranged to take place during school hours. The same is true for adults who are involved in day programming or are otherwise available during the day. If the employment team is willing, some experiences may be scheduled outside of standard business hours.

Step 7: Arrange transportation for the experience

A work-based learning experience provides the added opportunity to use the transportation options that will be available to the job seeker during employment. The job seeker may learn to use the local public transportation system, to schedule supported transportation, or to request and use transportation from friends or family. The job seeker can use school or program transportation designated for the work experience, if available, but exploring accessible and sustainable transportation options for the future is an important goal.

Step 8: Consider who will support the job seeker during the experience

Because work-based learning experiences are an opportunity for learning, a teacher or job coach is often present during the experience — both to facilitate the experience as well as assess what the job seeker is gaining from the experience. For some longer-term experiences, such as internships or apprenticeships, the job seeker may begin to increase independence without the steady presence of a teacher or coach. In these cases, the teacher or coach will work closely with the business owner or supervisor to ensure that the job seeker meets the goals of the work experience.

Step 9: Determine whether the experience will be done individually or as a group

The decision about type and location of work-based learning experience should begin with information gathered during a person-centered planning process. Ideally, the job seeker will have some one-on-one time in the community to focus on specific jobs and tasks that align with their interests and targeted learning needs. Additionally, time to meet and engage with business owners, managers and workers in the community can help the job seeker build relationships and workplace social skills.

In some cases, a work-based learning experience can be done in a small group setting. Ensure that the setting aligns with the job seeker's individualized goals and allows for personalized support. Job seekers shouldn't be placed in a group to do a work experience that isn't interesting to them or doesn't provide appropriate support.

Step 10: Arrange the experience

When you've found a business that's committed to providing a work-based learning experience:

- Hold informational interviews with key staff to learn about the business
- Review job descriptions and expectations
- Tour the business to observe various tasks being performed
- Determine the type of experience best suited for the business, being careful to avoid interrupting the standard workflow
- Gather names and contact information for the "go-to" people and on-site contacts to ensure natural supports
- Write a description of the experience to ensure that all support staff are aware of expectations and communicate them clearly to the job seeker
- List the targeted tasks, skills and work behaviors to be observed
- Set a timeframe and schedule for the experience

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